

Cobblestones: a Geographic Perspective

By Timothy McDonnell
New York Geographic Alliance

INTRODUCTION: Buildings made of stones, even round stones, are not unique, but the way they were constructed in Central and Western New York during the first half of the 19th century was special. It was “folk architecture,” with the planning and construction carried out by amateurs. The oldest cobblestone homes were built when the Erie Canal was being dug. By the time of the Civil War, the building stopped. There were many buildings constructed of *fieldstones*, dug out of the ground during spring planting. There were others made from *lake-washed stones*. As the name suggests they were rounded by the erosive power of water. As time progressed, masons got more creative, using stones with similar coloration or alternating between dark and light stones. There are some homes remaining today that used a *herringbone* style, where flat stones were placed leaning first to the left, and then to the right.

The questions we should be asking as geographers are:

- Why were they built between 1820 and 1860, and then why did it stop?
- Over two-thirds of the standing cobblestones are in the Niagara and Finger Lakes Region of New York State. Why only there?
- Where were the earliest and latest buildings constructed?
- Where are you more likely to find lake-washed or fieldstone cobblestones?

PROCEDURE:

1. Read over the excerpts from *Cobblestone Quest* by Rich and Sue Freeman. List five facts about cobblestone buildings that you didn't know before:

2. Look over the photographs of fieldstone, lake-washed, and herringbone cobblestone buildings. Describe the characteristics of each type of stone:

fieldstone:

lake-washed:

herringbone:

3. Look over the **Drumlin Map** on page 4 of this packet. *Drumlins* are oval-shaped hills that were made from loose material dumped by the glaciers during the Ice Age, and then molded into mounds by the glaciers passing over them.

Running through the middle of this map is a grey ribbon. What is it?

Most cobbles used there were used in constructed these historic homes differ from each other in color, texture, and composition. How can this be?

The majority of cobblestone buildings are found in this drumlin belt. Why do you think this is so?

4. There are many lake-washed stones found around Ridge Road (U.S. Route 104), not just along the Lake Ontario shoreline. How can this be? Look at the map showing glacial Lake Iroquois (p. 5) for a clue!

5. Now study the map titled “Cobblestones of Central-Western New York State.” **Count** the number of fieldstone and lake-washed cobblestone buildings north and south of the Old Erie Canal. Write your responses in the chart below:

Location	Fieldstone Construction	Lake-washed Construction
North of Erie Canal		
South of Erie Canal		

What patterns do you see?

What is your explanation from a geographic point-of-view?

There are many lake-washed stone buildings in eastern Ontario County, near Geneva and Seneca Lake. They seem to be the exception to the rule. From the reading taken from *Cobblestone Quest*, why did that happen?

6. Using the same map, locate the herringbone cobblestone buildings. How many are there in this survey? ____

Where are they located and why?

7. The Freemans compiled a nice list of cobblestone buildings in their book. One very good feature is the way they classify the buildings into three periods: *Early* (1820-1835), *Middle* (1835 – 1845), and *Late* (1845 -1860). Their findings have been summarized into lists showing all the counties where multiple cobblestones can be found today. This chart is on the last page of the packet.

Most of the cobblestones made in the Early Period are made of fieldstones. Why do you think this was so?

Which counties show the earliest examples of cobblestones (choose the top three)? Explain why:

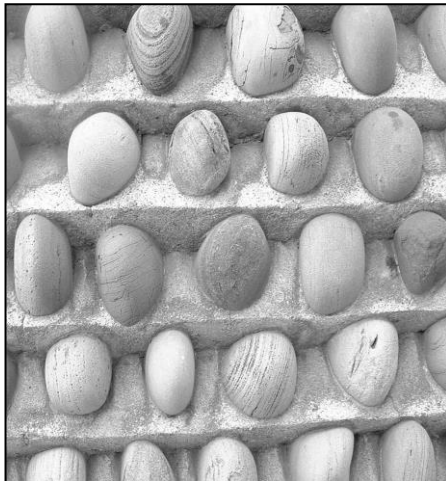
When were the majority of lake-washed cobblestone buildings constructed? What is your theory about that?

Houses made of mixed fieldstones and round lake-washed stones are found around the region. Where do you think the rougher and larger stones were placed and why?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: If you live in cobblestone country, you can expand on the work of Rich and Sue Freeman. On their maps they have located many houses that are not included on their tours. Check out the history of these homes. Do they follow similar patterns?



Fieldstone House

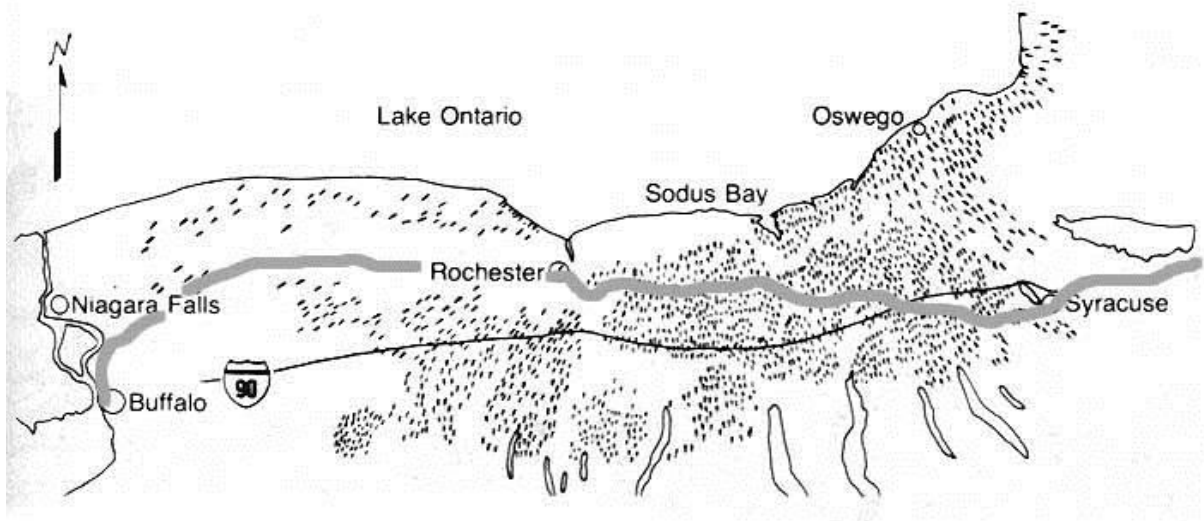


Lake-Washed Stones



Herringbone Design

Drumlin Map of Central-Western New York State

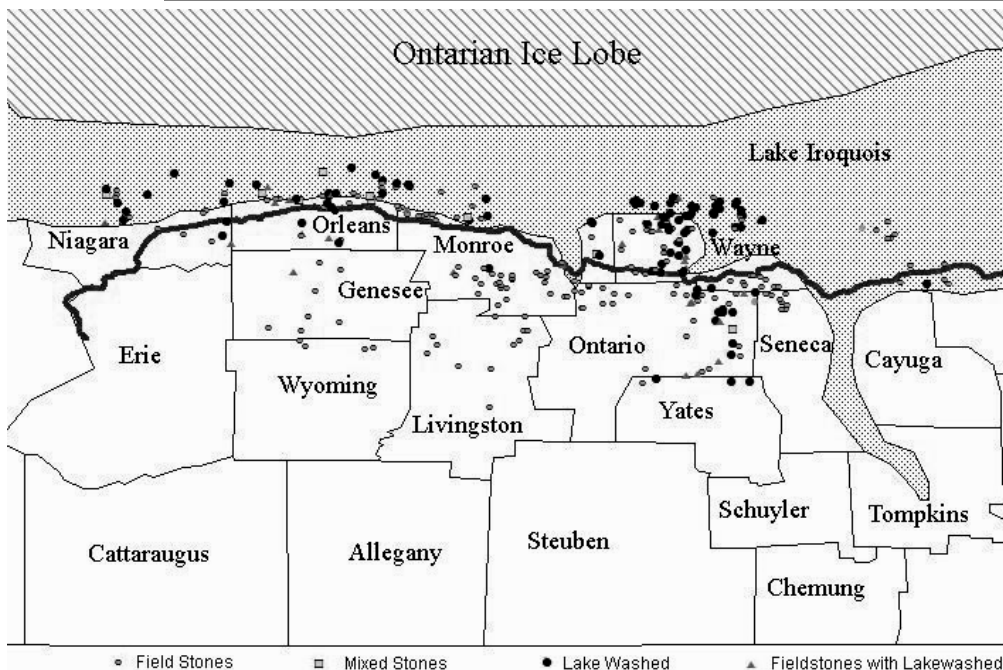
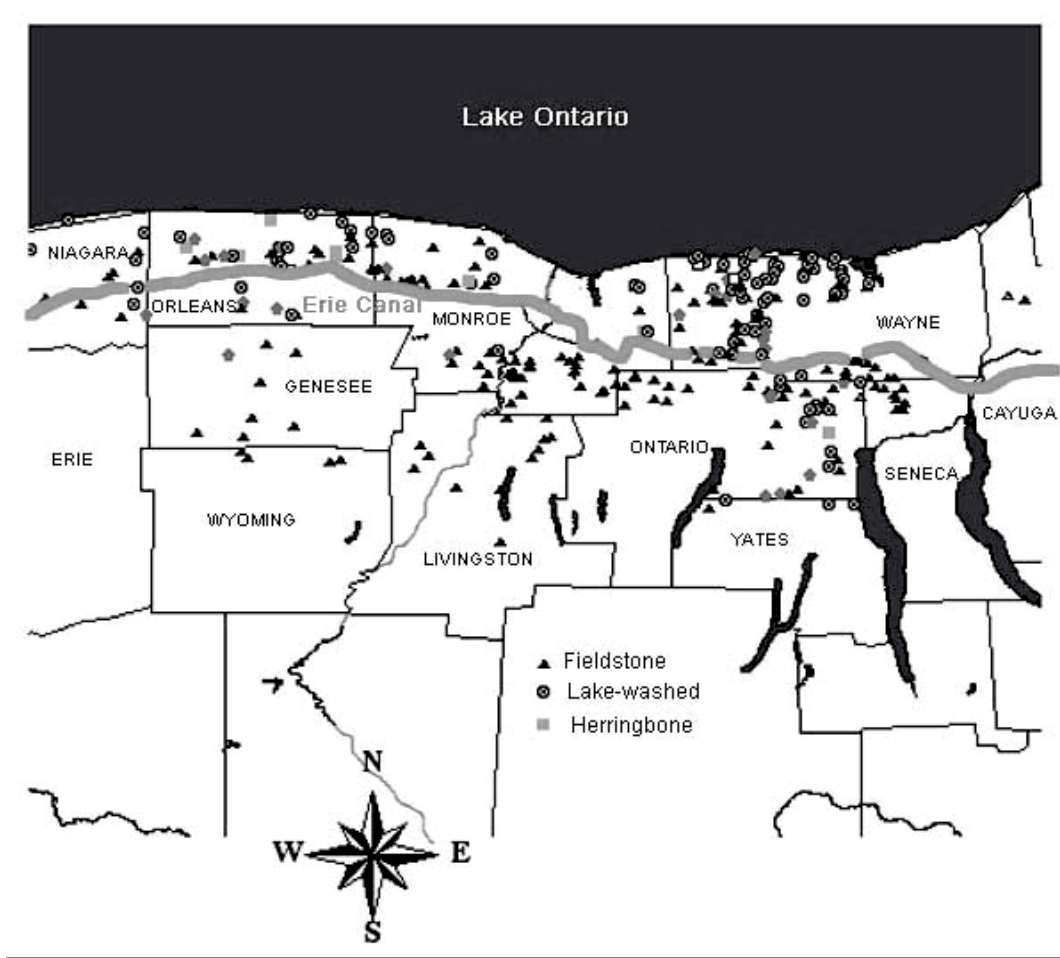


The small black teardrops are *drumlins*, hills dumped and carved by glaciers. A couple examples are shown below. The black line connecting Buffalo and Syracuse is part of the New York State Thruway (I-90).



Notice that a drumlin is a long skinny hill. When it has been cut open due to erosion, you can see that it is a mixture of dirt and round rocks (cobbles).

Cobblestone Map of Central – Western New York State



Cobblestone Buildings with the Likely Location of Glacial Lake Iroquois.

Route 104 today is Located along the Shoreline of Lake Iroquois.